



reframing the achievement gap

For the past two decades, sociologist Pedro Noguera has been at the forefront of a national conversation about how to strengthen urban schools. In contrast to those who focus on factors such as accountability and test scores in addressing the achievement gap, Noguera favors programs that emphasize the social, intellectual, and emotional development of low-income students. He is the co-founder of a Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, a national campaign that focuses on addressing social and economic disadvantages. BBA provides empirical research that demonstrates the value of a holistic approach for reducing the achievement gap among low-income students. The son of Caribbean immigrant parents, Noguera is the Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education at New York University, the executive director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, and co-director of the Institute for the Study of Globalization and Education in Metropolitan Settings (IGEMS). Contexts editorial board member Victor Rios, professor of sociology at University of California, Santa Barbara, conducted this interview.



courtesy of Pedro Noguera

Pedro Noguera

VICTOR RIOS: The Secretary of Education, Arnie Duncan, has called the achievement gap—the disparity in educational performance between black and Latino students, and white students—the most pressing educational issue in our country today. Your pioneering research seeks ways to close this gap. How do you think we can go about closing this achievement gap?

PEDRO NOGUERA: I would reframe it. I would say that the most pressing issue today facing the country is unequal-

to education, we have to think about it on multiple levels. Those disparities are produced both by the backgrounds of kids, that is, family income, parent education, neighborhood support, and social capital, but also by conditions within schools, such as pupil spending and teacher effectiveness. So, we really should think about both.

There's a lot less willingness to address the out-of-school factors. But I think there are things that could be done at a local level to reduce, or at

compensating for the disadvantages that affect the learning and development of children. For example, you have to think about extending learning opportunities after school such as summer school. You have to think about reducing class size, because we know that when teachers who are capable teach smaller numbers of kids, their ability to reach their kids goes up.

VR: You write about the educational marginalization of black and Latino boys who are often missing from university settings. What is the future of higher education for these young people?

PN: Well, unless concerted efforts are made to address the problem, we will continue to see black and Latino males vastly underrepresented in higher education. This has significant implications for the fastest growing segments of U.S. populations, particularly for Latinos. We have to first understand why this is occurring, why males in particular

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ity, and that the achievement gap is an educational manifestation of inequality. The only way we can really think about reducing disparities in achievement is by addressing social inequality. As it relates

least mitigate, some of the effects of poverty and inequality, like developing full service schools with extended day care programs and school-based clinics. Mainly, you have to think in terms of

are performing less well in school. It is not simply a school issue, it is a societal issue and the factors are complex and interrelated. They have to do with the intersections of class, race, and gender and the way that identities are constructed in school and outside of school. We know for example, that stereotypes pertaining to black and Latino males in our society have an impact on aspirations, on teacher expectations, and on the ways young boys and men are treated in everyday life by employers, by the police, and by other institutions. The good news is that there are schools that are more successful in educating black and Latino males and preparing them for college, and we have to learn from these schools and what they are doing differently. Typically, those schools provide a much more supportive learning environment—not only focused on academic needs. They are also focused on the students' social, emotional, and psychological needs.

VR: What are some examples of these schools?

PN: Well, there is an organization, a national coalition called Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (COS-BOC), which is a consortium of schools educating boys of color that works with schools from around the country. In New York there are many of these schools, such as the Eagle Academy, the Urban Assembly for Law and Justice, and the Bedford Academy. These are schools where nearly all the students are African American or Latino, but where higher levels of achievement are the norm. This is largely because of the factors I mentioned, including strong school leadership and teachers who work closely with students, and who focus much more on learning than on raising test scores.



Alexandra Garcia/The Washington Post/Getty Images

When he ran for president in 2008, Barack Obama handpicked Granby High School in Norfolk, Virginia, as a model for inner-city high schools.

VR: We have seen an astronomical rise in college tuition over the past five years in the U.S. What does this mean for low income young Americans in terms of higher education?

PN: I think it's quite ominous. I went to school in the 1970s, at a time where there were programs and a steady increase in access for students who are historically underrepresented. What we're seeing now is that college is getting less affordable and students have to take on much more debt. This is not

because they cannot afford school at all. I think that the long-term implications are quite troubling—especially given the growing diversity of this country and the fact that this generation of children will need to support the rapidly growing older, predominantly white population in their retirement by contributing to Social Security. So it is a huge problem facing our country.

VR: Your work is always policy and pedagogy relevant. Based on your extensive

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simply an issue that affects minority students or students of color; it affects working class students across the board. I think the big problem that we are already beginning to see in some states is students are making choices; they are choosing community college over four-year schools, or choosing to work

experience, what policy recommendations do you propose to support marginalized young people in their endeavors to achieve higher education?

PN: Part of what we have been pushing for is a rethinking of what we regard as standards. We need to move away from the notion that standards are about



Associated Press/Elise Amendola

Boston's English High School is the nation's oldest public high school and one of the most diverse. But it is also one of the lowest performing.

setting the academic bar higher. Instead we should focus on the conditions under which children learn, or under which teachers teach. States and districts need to get much more focused on how to ensure that there is equity and equality in those standards. Similarly, we have also been pushing against the kinds of

being a school board member (in Berkeley, California) and a university trustee (of the State University of New York). What is next for you in terms of research and policy?

PN: I'm constantly thinking about how to influence the direction of policy at local, state and federal levels, and where

VR: As a sociologist of inequality, education, and urban issues, what are your overall reflections on the future of higher education?

PN: As I said before, I think that until we can address this issue of access and the cost of higher education, we are in trouble as a nation. I think that the path we are on is unsustainable and that the institutions of higher education, particularly at public universities, are in trouble. Educational institutions cannot simply rely on tuition from affluent families or wealthy donors to cover costs. The public institutions are already in trouble. With the University of California and other large public systems, very difficult choices are being made about the future—choices that are jeopardizing the quality of higher education and certainly jeopardizing access for students from poor and working class backgrounds. I think that we have to figure out a way to address this. I haven't seen any states yet come up with creative solutions. This is the kind of work we need to be doing right now to ensure that institutions of higher education are accessible.

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policies that allow the most disadvantaged children to be concentrated in under-resourced schools. We've been exposing the fact that a new form of racial segregation is really widespread in this country. Part of my work is to shine a light on what is happening, and also to point in the direction of different approaches that can be taken to address these problems.

VR: You have taught in public schools, you have studied young people in local and international educational and community settings, and you've been a policy maker on many levels including

there is an openness or willingness to considering new approaches. I want to try to help policy makers to develop and enact new policies. For example, I've done work in several cities, including Pittsburgh, Hartford, Denver, and Houston, where there is a willingness to think in a more comprehensive and integrative manner about how to bring different services together to support schools. I think that kind of work can happen even when the federal government is not leading it, and we should look for areas where it is possible to do that work.